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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

THICH TRI QUANG AND BUDDHIST POLITICAL
OBJECTIVES IN SOUTH VIETNAM

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
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Thich Tri Quang and Buddhist Political
Objectives in South Vietnam

Summary

A Buddhist political victory stemming from the current political crisis in South Vietnam would almost certainly entail a temporary setback to US objectives and programs, but would not portend total disaster. The professed aims of the Buddhist leaders stress preservation of South Vietnamese independence and freedom from Communist domination.

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the Buddhists are a potent political factor with which any government must come to terms if it is to achieve stability.

The political bonzes, such as Thich (meaning "venerable") Tri Quang, do not necessarily speak for or represent the true aspirations of all South Vietnamese Buddhists, but they do have a more effective, mass-based political organization than anyone else in Vietnam other than the Communists. The Buddhist hierarchy is not Communist, although the activities of its leaders often aid the Communist cause. The attitudes and behavior of these men, and the Vietnamese public receptiveness of their political influence, have been conditioned by complex religious, political, and sociological factors over the course of Vietnamese history.

Should the Buddhists succeed in bringing to power a government under their control, the US would be confronted with delicate political problems. Over the longer term, however, a Buddhist-dominated government could have the effect of stabilizing the Vietnam situation.

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It is unlikely that a Buddhist government would deliberately hand South Vietnam to the Communists. Although the Buddhists desire the eventual termination of US presence and influence, key Buddhist leaders recognize that US economic and military support will be needed for some time. Though they appear to desire an independent South Vietnam under Buddhist control, they probably recognize that this goal cannot be achieved without US support and assistance against the Communists.

A Buddhist-controlled government would be viewed with resentment and great apprehension by other political and religious groups in South Vietnam, and some of these groups might attempt to bring the government down. Faced with a choice between the Buddhists and the Viet Cong, however, most other groups would probably eventually decide to go along with the Buddhists, hoping for the best, but expecting the worst.

Buddhist acquisition of political power would also cause deep strains within the Vietnamese military establishment. Over the short run, the unity and effectiveness of the armed forces would probably be impaired. It is at least possible, however, that the degree of latent support for the Buddhists prevalent throughout the armed forces could eventually result in better military unity and a greater sense of identity between the army and the populace.

Tri Quang

1. If the Buddhists succeed in toppling the present government of South Vietnam and installing a government responsive to their wishes, the net result will be a victory for Tri Quang, who will become at least temporarily the most powerful political figure in South Vietnam. Tri Quang is highly complex and uniquely Vietnamese. He is vain, equates "the people's" wishes with his own, and thoroughly enjoys playing the game of politics for its own sake. He is nationalistic to the point of xenophobia, a consummate master of the arts of agitation and pressure, and the most effective politician now active in South Vietnam. No one really knows what he wants, in concrete terms, and he himself probably could not spell out his positive objectives with any great degree of precision.

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the need for US support in fighting the Viet Cong and to the impossibility of negotiating with the Communists until they are defeated, there is little doubt that he desires to see the US out of South Vietnam at the earliest possible moment. He is probably capable of allying himself with the Communists if he considered this advantageous to achieving his political and religious goals, and he is sufficiently egotistical to believe he could shuck them as allies when they had served his immediate purposes. Often, he has seemed to regard the Vietnamese Catholics as a greater threat to his concepts of nationalism and Buddhism than the Communists.

Background of the Buddhist Movement

7. The historical development of Buddhism in Vietnam has helped to shape Tri Quang's political views, and, even more importantly, to provide him with a large and potentially receptive audience. Buddhism was introduced into Vietnam from China during the middle period of Chinese domination which lasted roughly over the first millennium A.D. Along with Buddhism, the Chinese introduced other religious ideas and doctrines, including Confucianism and Taoism, which underwent considerable fusion in Vietnam with the animism and spirit worship which were prevalent, particularly among the rural population.

8. Virtually all ethnic Vietnamese adhere to the Mahayana sect, an essentially northern branch of Buddhism. The ethnic Vietnamese originally inhabited the area that is now North Vietnam, and expanded southward only gradually over the course of several centuries to conquer what is now South Vietnam from the Khmers, or forerunners of the modern Cambodians. There is still a large minority Khmer population in the delta provinces of South Vietnam, who practice Theravada Buddhism (the Hinayana or "Lesser Vehicle" sect), a more orthodox form introduced from India and Ceylon. Although both the Mahayana and Theravada sects have a loose formal alliance today, the impact of South Vietnam's present Mahayana Buddhist leadership in the southernmost provinces of South Vietnam is still comparatively limited.

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Catholicism and the French

9. Buddhism had little political significance in Vietnam until the Ly Dynasty, which lasted from 1009-1224, officially sponsored the religion. This period of close political and religious cooperation between emperors and the Buddhist clergy was the high point of Vietnamese Buddhism, and the religion thereafter fell into a decline until recent years. This ancient period of glory, however, gave Buddhism in Vietnam something of a legendary "nationalist" aura which persists today. The decay of Buddhist influence in Vietnam was already well advanced when the French arrived. The imposition of French political authority in the 19th century was preceded by the introduction of Jesuit missionaries some two centuries earlier. The churchmen who followed eventually made their own alliances with Vietnam's contending power factions. In time, support--including armed mercenaries--from French Catholic prelates actually helped to install the Nguyen Dynasty, whose last emperor Bao Dai was deposed in 1954. The involvement of the French clergy, and their Vietnamese followers, resulted in calls for increasing support from the French Government, leading in turn to French military intervention, and ultimately to the establishment of French political control over all of Indochina.

10. The French ruled Indochina largely through Vietnamese officials guided by French "advisers!" The majority of these Vietnamese were at least nominally Catholic, partly because the education requirements for the Vietnamese administrative class were mainly available in church-controlled French schools. The French also found it advantageous, in order to maintain their control, to encourage regional and local loyalties, political factionalism, and parochialism among their Catholic and non-Catholic subjects. They did little to discourage the existing divisive tendencies in Vietnamese Buddhism. Thus, traditionally, and not without some justification, non-Catholic Vietnamese have tended to identify Catholicism with the European foreigner, and with foreign domination.

11. In the 1920s, a period of Buddhist resurgence began, roughly coinciding with the emergence

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of the anti-French nationalist movements in Vietnam, including the Communist movement. The Buddhist resurgence reflected not only a xenophobic nationalism, which is in itself a pronounced Vietnamese trait, but also the deep-seated historical animosities between Catholic and non-Catholic Vietnamese. The replacement of French colonialism in South Vietnam by the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem, even though Diem was an intensely anti-French nationalist, tended to perpetuate the control of the Catholic mandarin class which had prospered under the French. Although Diem did not officially discriminate between Catholics and Buddhists and did not suppress freedom of religion, the mainstays of his political support were mostly Catholic, either politically organized supporters from his native central Vietnam, or militantly anti-Communist refugees from North Vietnam. As Diem's government developed increasingly autocratic tendencies, it acquired an increasingly tight political control mechanism largely dominated by Catholics, and the groundwork was thus laid for a "religious issue" on which the Buddhists could capitalize and criticism and opposition to Diem could focus.

The Present-Day Buddhist Movement

12. The number of devout, actively practicing Buddhists in South Vietnam is about 2-2.5 million as compared with 1-1.5 million practicing Catholics. Most other Vietnamese in the South are religious eclectics, adhering to a vague mixture of animism, ancestor worship, and Confucian ethical precepts. However, since the overwhelming majority of Vietnamese are non-Catholic, the Buddhist movement has provided them with a vehicle for voicing their opposition to politically powerful Catholicism. Buddhism also provides a means for the expression of nationalism by non-Catholic Vietnamese, as well as a focal point for opposition to a particular government in Saigon.

13. Prior to World War II, the Buddhists made several efforts to launch regional or national associations. In the upsurge of Asian nationalism after the war, a General Association of Vietnamese Buddhists was formed in 1951. This organization, a loose federation of regional Buddhist associations,

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was designed to permit an exchange of views and to foster some sense of unity among Buddhist sects. Essentially, however, Buddhist loyalties were still centered around the monks in a particular pagoda or sect, or among the ranking monks in urban areas. The policies and practices of Diem--and particularly the events of May 1963 in Hue, which catapulted Tri Quang into national prominence--acted as a catalyst for pushing the Buddhists, and particularly the monks, into the political scene. In the ensuing months of conflict with the Diem government, the Buddhists displayed hitherto unsuspected organizational and political talents, using the shell of the General Association of Buddhists for their purposes.

14. The struggle against Diem, culminating in his overthrow by the military, gave the Buddhists a new sense of unity and their leaders an appetite for power. A Vietnamese Buddhist reunification congress held at the close of 1963 led to the creation of a new organization, the Unified Buddhist Association (UBA), embracing all the main Buddhist sects including the Theravada sect. The UBA has two general divisions: a High Clerical Council which is nominally supreme and concerned with spiritual matters, and an Institute for the Propagation of the Faith (the Vien Hoa Dao or VHD) which is the UBA's executive arm, particularly in secular matters. Under the VHD, whose chairman is Thich Tam Chau, are six general commissions which bear a striking resemblance to shadow ministries in a political party seeking office.

15. The over-all head of the UBA is Thich Tinh Khiet, a revered octogenarian bonze who is ostensibly the "leader" and spiritual head of the Buddhist movement. In fact, he is merely a facade for younger and more militant bonzes, particularly Tri Quang, who is secretary-general of the High Clerical Council. There has long been a rivalry between Tri Quang, representing the militant Buddhists of central Vietnam, and Tam Chau, who, while headquartered in Saigon, draws his power from and is the spokesman for refugee Buddhists from North Vietnam. Chau, approximately the same age as Tri Quang, is generally regarded as more moderate. Even though there are apparently some genuine policy differences between the two men,

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Buddhist intrusions into politics have almost invariably ended with Quang calling the shots, and Chau either falling into step or retreating from active engagement. Chau is frequently a target--as Tri Quang never is--of Viet Cong attacks and charges that he is a "US puppet."

16. Of the many other political bonzes in South Vietnam, the most prominent at present are Thich Thien Minh, a Tri Quang follower of similarly radical views, and Thich Ho Giac, a firebrand orator who generally sides with Tam Chau and who is one of the few ethnic Vietnamese Theravada bonzes, having been reared in Cambodia. Another well-known monk, Yale-educated Thich Quang Lien, is apparently close to, but not entirely of, the Buddhist inner circles. Lien's efforts to launch a peace movement in early 1965, whether or not promoted by the Buddhist hierarchy, were squelched by both the hierarchy and the Quat government as suspicions arose that the Buddhists were deliberately playing into Viet Cong hands. Communist propaganda, however, consistently denounced Lien's movement as not on the "correct path," and implied that it was some form of US trick. A strongly anti-Communist monk, Thich Duc Nghiep, was active in the Buddhist campaign against Diem, but has since gone abroad. Nghiep's preoccupation with combating Communism apparently went far beyond the commitment his colleagues were prepared to make, and also appeared to have aroused their suspicion that he was bidding for US backing in the rivalry for Buddhist leadership.

Buddhist Political Aims

17. It is frequently conjectured that the democratic institutions which the Buddhist leaders say are their goals are to them only the means for attaining a Buddhist-dominated state, although not necessarily a theocracy. According to Buddhist public statements and their private conversations with US officials, the Buddhists now desire a unicameral, elected legislature. Although Tri Quang has often spoken of the need for a strong central government, the Buddhists appear to be speaking of a parliamentary government chosen by and responsible to this legislature. Quang has also spoken of an

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"interim" assembly, to be composed of representatives named by the provincial and municipal councils elected in May 1965. This interim body would draft a constitution and either "confirm" the present government in office pending elections, or choose some other provisional regime. The purpose of this pre-election procedure is allegedly to give South Vietnam a "legally" based government as quickly as possible.

18. The Buddhists say that they could win an election majority--something probable, but not yet proven--but that they desire a balanced government of the best available men. However, the probable composition of either a provisional or a permanent government dominated by the Buddhists cannot be accurately predicted. It is doubtful that any of the more prominent bonzes, particularly Tri Quang, would serve in any responsible executive post. Some, including Tam Chau, might agree to be a member of either an interim or permanent assembly; Tri Quang, who apparently prefers to dominate from the wings, almost certainly would not.

19. It is not unlikely that, at least in an interim government, the Buddhists would invite some well-known figure, such as exiled General Duong Van "Big" Minh, to act as chief of state; they have even indicated that they would accept a Catholic not associated with the Diem regime in this post. They might well insist upon some prominent Buddhist civilian as premier, although Tri Quang has also indicated that he would accept some nonreligious figure such as retired General Tran Van Don. In the case of an interim assembly, the Buddhists would either press for early elections of a permanent legislature, or try to transform an interim body, if sufficiently pliable, into a permanent legislature.

20. Elections held under Buddhist sponsorship would probably be rigged to produce a Buddhist-controlled legislature, but some prominent politicians not under Buddhist control, such as Dr. Pham Quang Dan, could probably win seats. On the hypothesis that the Buddhists were able, and would choose, to install a fully Buddhist government, the

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premier would undoubtedly be some activist Buddhist lay politician, such as Bui Tuong Huan, the rector of the Hue University. Ministerial posts would probably be staffed by younger Buddhist intellectuals and laymen, and possibly some Buddhist-oriented army officers. The government's installation would, of course, be followed by a wholesale change of province chiefs, as is standard Vietnamese practice.

Catholic and Non-Buddhist Reaction

21. A Buddhist-controlled government would be viewed with resentment and great apprehension by other political groups in South Vietnam. The Catholics, especially northern refugee militants, would be deeply disturbed. Some Catholic groups, such as the followers of Father Hoang Quynh and Father Nguyen Quang Lam, would almost certainly attempt some form of agitation, at least in the Saigon area, in the hope of bringing the government down. Faced with a choice between the Buddhists and the Viet Cong, however, most Catholics would probably eventually decide, with varying degrees of reluctance, that they had no choice but to go along with the new government, hoping for the best, but expecting the worst.

22. Other minority elements including the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao would also be disturbed, although perhaps less violently than the Catholics; the "southerners"--those born in the southern provinces or former Cochinchina--would be additionally resentful of the government on regional grounds, since Tri Quang and his close Buddhist cohorts are from the "center" provinces. Areas where the minority groups are locally strong, as in parts of the delta, might more or less "secede" from the central government, although the political consequences would be less severe than the secession of I Corps.

23. Buddhist acquisition of political power would cause deep strains within the Vietnamese military establishment. Some officers, particularly Catholics, would probably be inclined to coup attempts in order to reassert military control. Should the Buddhists move quickly to put

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loyal officers into key command positions, the military die-hards, like the Catholic community, might find themselves faced with the unpalatable choice of the Buddhists or the Viet Cong, and opt for the Buddhists. Over the short run, under Buddhist rule, the unity and effectiveness of the South Vietnamese military establishment would probably be impaired. How permanent the damage might be cannot be predicted, but it is at least possible that the degree of latent support for the Buddhists prevalent throughout the military, particularly in the lower ranks and in I Corps, could eventually result in greater military unity and a greater sense of identity between the army and the populace.

24. There is no reason to believe that, once in power, the Buddhists would be more monolithic than any other Vietnamese group. There are already obvious divisions within their ranks. Tam Chau and his predominantly northern followers are restive over the primacy accorded Tri Quang and his central Vietnam-based faction. Many southern Buddhists--principally lay leader Mai Tho Truyen and his supporters but also many of the Theravada sect--are not in sympathy with Tri Quang's present pressure campaign. Although moderate voices within the Buddhist movement have tended to be muted in time of struggle, internal strains and disagreements would undoubtedly reappear if the Buddhists were in power.

25. A government such as that envisaged above would probably find it difficult to exert effective centralized authority throughout the country. It would be beset with squabbling, irresolution, and unrealism in its paramount parliamentary body, and with jockeying for power and position even among Buddhist factions. The pace and tempo of the counter-insurgency effort would almost certainly be checked, at least temporarily, thus placing the burden of containing the Viet Cong almost entirely on US and allied forces.

26. Many of the weaknesses of a Buddhist government, however, would be those which, in varying degrees, would plague any new Vietnamese government. Provided US and allied military strength and related assistance could prevent the Communists from making too many inroads during a period of unsettled

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transition, a Buddhist-dominated government might have some assets not enjoyed by any of its predecessors. A major reason for this is that, apart from the Communists, the Buddhists currently have the only effective mass organization in South Vietnam. Although the Catholics are similarly, and perhaps better disciplined, the Buddhist political structure has deeper popular roots, particularly in central Vietnam and along the coastal strip north of Saigon, than any other political body. Although the extent to which the Buddhists are capable of marshaling their followers in support of, rather than in opposition to, a government remains to be seen, a Buddhist government would have a potentially stronger and broader base than any of its predecessors.

27. Buddhism, as a politico-religious idea, has shown itself capable of touching deep emotional chords within large segments of the Vietnamese population. A sensitively nationalistic Buddhist government might be something Communist propaganda would not find easy to attack. The Communists would also have difficulty finding any willing allies among such natural opponents of a Buddhist government as the Catholics who seem unalterably opposed to Communism.

Buddhist Domination and US Policy

28. Tri Quang, Tam Chau, and other political bonzes who have discussed Buddhist objectives with US officials have all implied that the Buddhists alone can "legalize" the US position in Vietnam. They claim that they are anxious for continued US support, that they want with US assistance to pursue the work of social revolution, and that they realize the impossibility of accommodation or negotiation with the Viet Cong under present circumstances. By implication at least, they claim that they want to prosecute the war. The sincerity of these claims is perhaps open to question, and the way that professed Buddhist objectives would be translated into concrete government programs cannot be confidently predicted.

29. It is possible, however, that the responsibilities of power would be as sobering to the Buddhists

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as to many other successful revolutionaries. The intelligent and sophisticated anti-Communism that the Buddhist leaders profess to endorse might be reinforced if, once their followers were in power, the Buddhists discovered that Viet Cong elements who have succeeded in penetrating the Buddhist-inspired "struggle movement" were unwilling to suspend agitation and disruptive activities. The excesses of Communist penetration in various "struggle" groups have already given anti-Communist elements grounds for openly expressed concern.

30. While it is arguable that the Communists might lie low to encourage the possibility of fruitful negotiations with a Buddhist regime, the Communists will not necessarily reason and act in this fashion. The net result of their continuing disruptive activities, and possibly even of the present "struggle" movement, may be to implant in Buddhist circles a heightened awareness of the need for combating the Communist menace. If the Buddhists were to become totally engaged in the anti-Communist fight, they might be a more potent political adversary than any the Viet Cong have yet faced.

31. There is little question that the Buddhists emotionally resent the present extent of US involvement in Vietnamese affairs and the sheer physical magnitude of the current US military presence, with the side effects it inevitably entails. There is no doubt that the Buddhists would ultimately like to see the Americans leave, a goal certainly not incompatible with US objectives. Whether the Buddhists would attempt to force an early US withdrawal in a manner which would result in inevitable Communist victory remains to be seen. There is some danger that, even if this is not their immediate intention, their shortsightedness may prompt them to act in ways which would risk just this result.

32. On balance, it seems unlikely that a Buddhist government would deliberately deliver South Vietnam into the hands of the Communist regime in Hanoi. Tri Quang probably desires an independent South Vietnam, but under Buddhist control and not under Communist political dictation. He probably recognizes that these goals cannot be achieved

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without US support and assistance, but preoccupation with his own cleverness and with immediate objectives could lead him into courses of action and alliances which he could not reverse.

33. A Buddhist government, particularly one acquiring power in conditions which caused severe loss of face to the Vietnamese military, would almost certainly essay a different approach to the war and related pacification programs. The actions and policies of such a government would soon clarify whether Tri Quang is a pro-Communist neutralist, as some American and Vietnamese observers contend, or the anti-Communist nationalist he himself claims to be. In any event, there would inevitably be some period of dislocation, during which US and allied forces would have to bear much of the burden of containing Viet Cong incursions and attempts to profit from a disruption of central authority.

34. Over the longer term, however, a Buddhist government might prove to have deeper roots in Vietnamese traditions than any of its predecessors. Such a government's relations with the US would be delicate and difficult, particularly since a Buddhist government would be touchily nationalistic, and would have a different style of operation from its more Western-oriented predecessors. A Buddhist-dominated government would perhaps be more concerned with the purity of its revolutionary concepts than with the practical details of political administration or with concrete problems such as inflation requiring concrete solutions. Nevertheless, a government in which the Buddhists had a predominant voice could produce a focus for emergent Vietnamese nationalism which, eventually, could give the whole non-Communist nationalist structure a stronger foundation than it presently enjoys.

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